



# Adam McLean's Study Course on Inner alchemy and alchemical symbolism

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## Lesson Nine : Variations between different versions of emblems.

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For this lesson we turn away from directly encountering the symbolism found in emblems and look again, as we did in lesson one, at more technical matters. Here we must discover how to deal with the variations in the symbolic treatment found in different versions of the same emblem. In lesson one we had to develop the ability to discriminate between symbols and decorative elements, now we must take a look at the ways in which different engravers or the writers of different alchemical manuscripts, handle the same symbolic content in different ways.

We will find four main possibilities.

1. The symbolic content is the same in two different version of an emblem, with minor differences of expression.
2. The symbolic content is the same in two different version of an emblem, but with major stylistic changes and differences of expression. It may even be difficult, on an initial viewing, to recognise that these are the same emblem.
3. The symbolic content differs in two different version of an emblem. Here a later engraver or scribe has reinterpreted the symbolic content in a new way.
4. The introduction of mistakes, where a later worker has in error misread one symbol as another, and placed a wrong image into the emblem space, sometimes distorting the original intention of the emblem's author.

As an example of the first possibility, let us look at two versions of the keys of Basil Valentine. These are best known in the engravings of Michael Maier's *Tripus Aureus* 1618, but there are a number of other versions. Here is a woodcut version from a German edition of 1677 (which is almost an exact copy of the woodcut in the original 1602 edition). As you will see the symbolic content is the same.



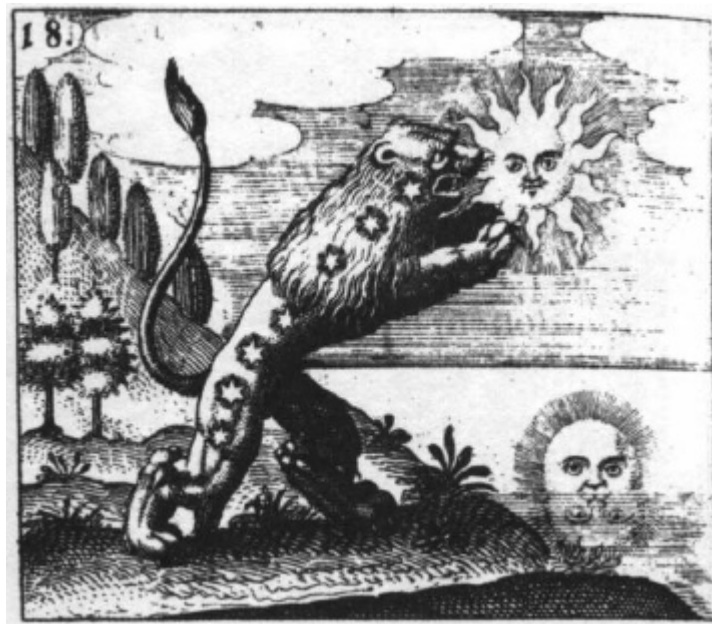
Again using Basil Valentine's 'Keys' as an example, here is the same engraving from the *Tripus Aureus* 1618 and in comparison another from the 1659 French edition printed in Paris. Here you will see the later version is mirrored in reverse. This is quite common when copying engravings. Engravers cut the image in reverse into a copper plate. An engraver (unless he is very skillful) will opt to copy exactly the image given to him from a printed plate, and consequently when printed the image is reversed. This could be important when we are considering the right left placement of images in the emblem space.



An example of the second possibility, where it is more difficult to see the similarities between the emblems (as the later version has been more radically changed with major stylistic aspects and differences of expression) is from the *Rosarium Philosophorum*. Here is the original woodcut version of the first emblem from the *Rosarium* (1550) compared with the later engraved version in Mylius' *Philosophia reformata* (1622).

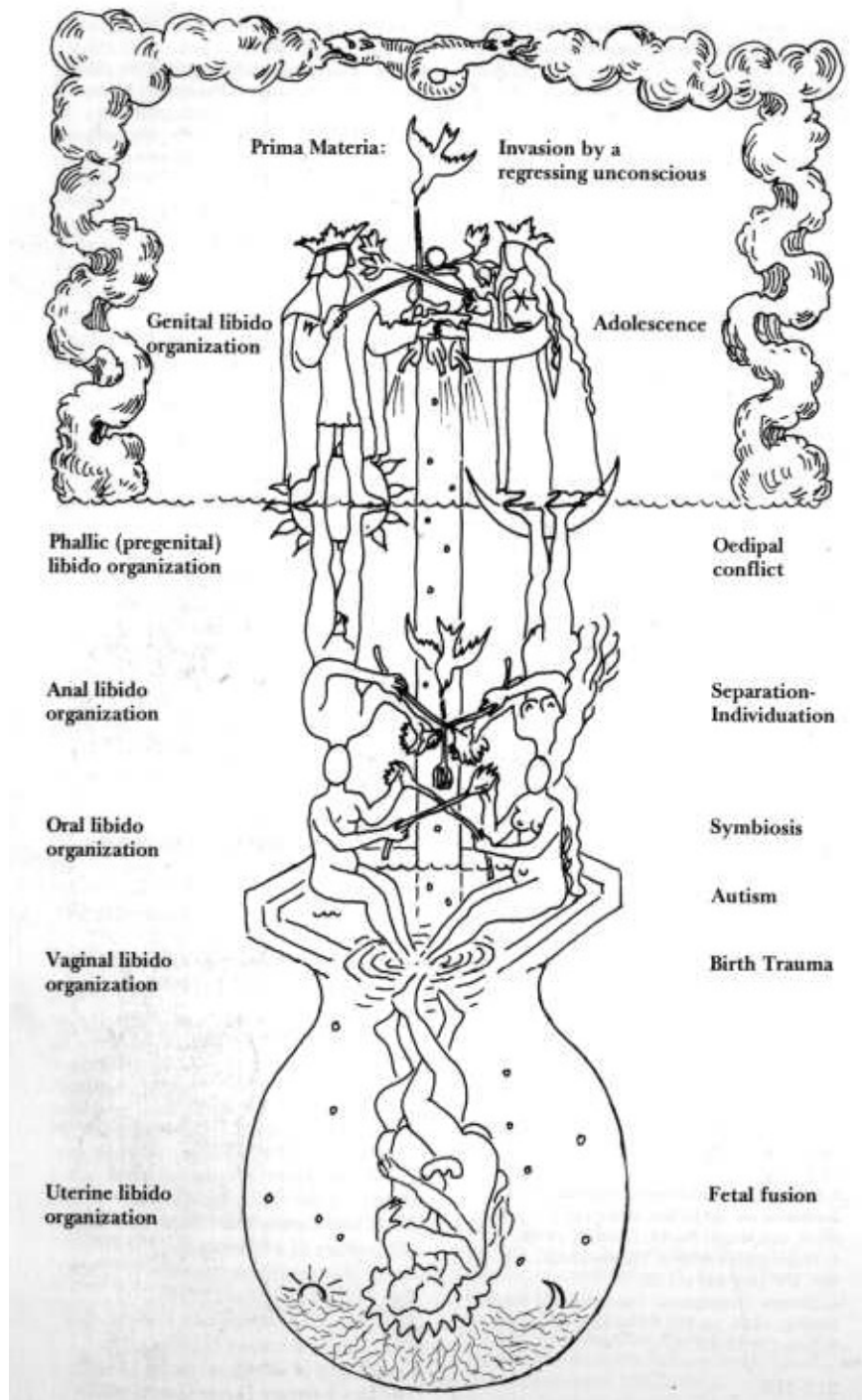


Here is an example of the third possibility. Firstly the original woodcut from the 1550 *Rosarium* of the well known image of the green lion devouring the sun. Then a manuscript of the same emblem made by Jaros Griemiller in 1578 (now in Prague). This introduces a moon in conjunction with the sun and echoes this duality by depicting the lion with a double or forked tail. The third example is from the *Mylius Philosophia reformata* version of the Rosarium. Here a moon (or perhaps a reflection of the sun) is seen descending into the sea. The body of the lion also bears the seven planetary stars.



Part of the purpose of this lesson is to make us aware that the symbolic content of emblems can change through time as they pass through various hands and minds. Engravers can introduce errors through mistakes in copying images (especially from the sometimes rough drawings found in some alchemical manuscripts). Later alchemists can rework the symbolic material in earlier emblems and reinterpret this through their own mindset and preconceptions. Thus it is important for us to work with the correct version of the emblem for our purpose. If we want to investigate the original intention of say the author of the Basil Valentine 'Keys', then we look to the earliest versions of the emblems. If we want to look at the 18th century French reinvention of Flamel, then we must look to the many coloured manuscripts and engraved plates and see exactly how they rework and reinterpret the original woodcut figures of the early 17th century.

While the minutiae of cataloguing variations in these emblems might seem to be the province of scholars, it is very important that we, in investigating alchemical symbolism, remain aware that these changes (often not that subtle) are being introduced in the later reworking of alchemical emblems. In the twenty first century it is very easy for an artist or esotericist using a computer to cut images out of emblems and reassemble them for their own purposes. We must become aware of the need to keep to the original context of the emblem, otherwise we will not be able to understand the inner coherence of the symbolic material in the original emblem. Of course this also often happened earlier in the alchemical tradition, as with Stolcius' two books of emblems published in the 1620's, where he took alchemical engravings out of their original context and presented them with a new verse text. At least Stolcius understood alchemy and knew many of the engravers and originators of this material. People manipulating these images today do not have such a close relationship to the alchemical tradition, indeed they may never have read a single alchemical text, and are motivated by aesthetic, esoteric or philosophical considerations entirely peripheral to alchemy. To illustrate this I next show a re-working of the opening five emblems from the *Rosarium* contained in the Freudian Fabricius' book on alchemy. Here the *Rosarium* process is reinterpreted in Freudian terms - none of which would be recognised by the original creator of these images.



**Exercises.** In these examples you should try to identify all the different or modified aspects of the symbolism and then further try to judge whether these changes have made some difference to the symbolic core of the emblem. In doing this you should not attempt to interpret the meaning of the emblems or try to analyse them into some abstract set of ideas, but rather just appreciate whether the changes between the emblems marks a departure from the original symbol structure or is merely a decorative or stylistic change.

Example 1. Frontispieces from the 1741 and the 1752 editions of J.G. Kiessling *Relatio practica...*



Example 2. Woodcut from Basil Valentine *Azoth* 1613, and the corresponding engraving from the Azoth series in Mylius *Philosophia reformata*, 1622.



Example 3. Here are some other examples of the *Rosarium* woodcuts on 1550 and the corresponding versions in Mylius *Philosophia reformata*, 1622.

